



# TABLEWARE: BOWLED OVER BY DEMAND

by Mike Hall

Australia's market for bespoke handmade ceramic tableware for high-end restaurants and cafes is booming, but are there enough potters with the skills, knowledge and capacity to meet demand?

In a shed smaller than a single-car garage, leather-hard porcelain plates are laid out on a bench. Others sit on shelves just beneath the roof, and dozens of cups are stacked ready for glazing. At his wheel, Malcolm Greenwood is trimming plates destined for Bennelong, one of Australia's top restaurants just across the harbour from his Mosman home. The cups will travel further, to Baillie Lodges' Southern Ocean Lodge on Kangaroo Island.

Sydney's most expensive suburb is an unlikely location for a production potter, but Greenwood has been making in the backyard of his home full-time since he left the corporate world aged 37. He is now 65. He throws, works with slabs, and makes some orders on two small jigger-jolly machines, and reckons on selling 10–15,000 pieces a year to 60–70 clients. His glaze room is the open yard, and he fires a single gas kiln weekly. Two part-timers help, one with packing and shipping.

Greenwood, who learned from Makoto Yabe in Boston in the 1970s, holds strong to Japanese disciplines and aesthetics. Over the past seven or eight years, he and a growing number of Australian potters have gathered new patrons among top chefs, including Peter Gilmore of Quay and Bennelong, Brent Savage of Bentley, and Ben Shewry of Melbourne's Attica, who seek to match the philosophy of their food with the plates and bowls they serve it in.

More than a decade ago, at a time when functional work by studio potters had been all but eclipsed by cheap imports, Australian chefs began to embrace a new movement that emphasised locally-sourced, farm-to-table, artisanal, organic, slow food. Industrially-made white porcelain, the ubiquitous blank canvas preferred at the time, fell out of favour and demand for local, artisan-made ceramics took off.

"It's still booming," says Ben Richardson of Ridgeline Pottery in Tasmania, who has completed work in the last 12 months for four of Australia's top ten restaurants and is currently making for the 5-Star

**Malcolm Greenwood**, 2017, wheelthrown porcelain, slip and ash glaze; honey and lemon thyme almond crumble, island bush lemon granita and meringue for Capella Lodge; photo: Rhiannon Taylor



Malcolm Greenwood in his Sydney studio, 2017; photo: Mike Hall

Saffire resort. He's about to hold a "clay play day" with staff at Attica, recently ranked Australia's No. 2 restaurant, and discuss new designs with Shewry. "We're trying to manage the demand down, and sometimes that means knocking back work."

Ceramicists Jacqueline Clayton (formerly of UNSW Art & Design) and Paul Davis (formerly with Monash University and Sturt Craft Centre), who collaborate as Studio Jam in Newcastle, have had a key role in the tableware revival. Gilmore got in touch with them more than a decade ago and was soon using stoneware and low-fired matt glazes for a more handmade, rustic, natural, aesthetic to match his dishes. "Paul was the perfect person for that," says Gilmore. "His glaze knowledge is incredible." All of Quay and Bennelong's plateware is made by Australian ceramicists, including Clayton and Davis, Greenwood, Richardson and Victorian potter Christopher Plumridge.

One of the more extraordinary commissions was the work Clayton and Davis completed for Danish chef Rene Redzepi (then ranked best in the world) who opened a pop-up in Sydney of his famed Noma for just ten weeks in 2016. The pair had seven months to develop the entire range. Redzepi's



**Malcolm Greenwood**, 2017, cut and turned porcelain slab with slip for Bentley Bar & Restaurant, w.35cm  
Photo: Jen Chen

brief was simple: the crockery had to reflect the colours of Australia, without using any glazes. Their work included researching Danish settlement in Australia, developing their own clay from various sources, employing different firing techniques to obtain each colour, and sourcing a food-safe sealant from Germany. "It was very intense, and tested our boundaries," said Clayton. "But we enjoy that. It extended our repertoire."

Savage of Bentley Bar was another early adopter of the local and handmade. Initially, he stocked a Spanish supplier. "It seemed a bit strange to be taking a plate that had come halfway around the world out of the warming oven while we were striving to source local ingredients for the dishes. It just didn't fit with the ethos of the restaurant." He discovered Malcolm Greenwood via The Australian Ceramics Association. "We couldn't get much more local than Mosman."

Savage worked with Greenwood to develop organic shapes and unusual glazes. "Sometimes, Malcolm will do a glaze and I'd be like 'that's perfect!' and he'd say 'it's rubbish', but I'll try and get him to replicate it." Greenwood, he says, is acutely aware of the rigours of the commercial kitchen, in



**Jacqueline Clayton and Paul Davis, *Large Plate*** 2016, mottled black glaze on porcelain with John Dory and edible flowers for Bennelong, w.30cm  
Photo: Brett Stevens

the way he makes the edges of his ware, for example, as well as shapes. "With a plate," says Savage, "chefs want their sauces to run back to the middle."

Luxury resorts and boutique hotels are significant buyers, too. Sydney-based Baillie Lodges has bought crockery regularly from Greenwood for about a decade. With three luxury resorts, co-owner Hayley Baillie says 70 per cent of their guests are experiential travellers from overseas. "Having something uniquely Australian and uniquely made for us is another one of those elements that create that sense of place."

Simon Reece, a ceramic artist in Blackheath, straddles the tension between art and function. Although he's been making cups for world renowned chef Tetsuya Wakuda for more than 15 years, some of his pieces push chefs' boundaries. He makes uneven glazed slabs, mini landscape-like sculptures. "They have edges, but the point is they're sculptural objects which give the chef an opportunity to build something sculptural when they're plating," says Reece. "They may not be as practical, but they're good for the sheer wow factor."

A concern among experienced potters is both the lack of skilled ceramicists in some areas to meet demand locally, and the lack of skills of some who are already selling to restaurants and cafes. It has allowed mediocre work to creep in. "I despair at times at some of the work I see," says Greenwood.

“But you can’t blame people – they haven’t been taught proper techniques and they don’t have the experience.”

Clayton agrees. “You don’t want pieces that aren’t up to scratch going into commercial use,” she says. “If the work can’t accommodate the conditions and rigours of a commercial kitchen, then restaurants turn to industrially-made ceramics, which affects the whole market.” Magazine stylists want something that photographs well, so they’re looking for texture, colour and unusual shapes, she says. “These pieces may look great, but they’re not going to perform in a commercial environment.”

Almost all tertiary institutions have dropped any form of vocational training in ceramics, a gap many potters themselves are trying to fill with their own classes and workshops. But Richardson sees the need for an institutional response: “We’ve gone through a whole period where people have been told in educational institutions to grow up and make art not crockery,” he says. “So right when we have this boom in demand there are very few people around with either the skills or interest in this area.”

Damon Moon, Creative Director of Ceramics at JamFactory in Adelaide, says the re-entry of the private sector echoes an earlier era. “I haven’t see ceramics this healthy in at least two decades,” he says. “There’s a bit of a fashion at the moment for slightly clunky, crudely made things and there are



**Jacqueline Clayton and Paul Davis, *Bowl***  
2016, sugar white matt glaze on porcelain with Berkshire Pork and radish, for Bennelong, w.23cm  
Photo: Brett Stevens

## TABLEWARE TIPS

# IF YOU PLAN ON MAKING TABLEWARE HERE ARE A FEW POINTERS FROM THE CHEFS AND POTTERS INTERVIEWED:

### SKILLS

*Reflect on your knowledge and skills and make an honest assessment of your experience, ability and capacity to create the kind of work required by a commercial kitchen.* **Malcolm Greenwood**

### COLLABORATE

*The aesthetic of your work needs to match that of the chef, so be open to collaborate. And if a chef commissions something special, they don't want to see it in every restaurant a year later.* **Peter Gilmore**

### DESIGN

*People often put too much into the work and don't leave enough room for the decorating that the chef's doing. The work shouldn't be too assertive.* **Ben Richardson**

*The ware must be light enough to be handled by wait staff, but not so fragile that it's going to break when knocked together. Dishes will go through a commercial dishwasher at much hotter temperatures.* **Peter Gilmore**

### GLAZES

*Glazes must be food safe, so make sure you've done your research thoroughly.* **Jacqueline Clayton**

*You don't want uniformity, but you also don't want very different shades of the same glaze hitting the table and looking quite different.* **Peter Gilmore**

*Rounded edges are more durable, and bases need to be strong with a smooth base, because a lot of restaurant tables are timber and will scratch.* **Peter Gilmore**

### MARKETING

*You can't charge the sort of prices you would for an exhibition piece, but chefs understand it's not going to be as cheap as something that's mass produced.* **Peter Gilmore**

people who supply that market. Others make with skill and finesse. My strong feeling though is that the more activity there is, the better."

For his part, Greenwood is keen for Australian ceramicists to nurture the tableware market and emphasises an age-old tradition among potters everywhere: handing on knowledge to others. "What's important is a spirit of generosity and sharing," he says. "And not stepping on each other's toes, and

being respectful of each other's customers. Yes, we're competing, but if we're not sharing we close ourselves off to all sorts of opportunities."

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Below: **Simon Reece**, *Black Crag*, 2014, handbuilt stoneware, synthetic Hagi glaze for *Dessert Divas*  
by Christine Manfield; photo: Anson Smart

Far below: **Simon Reece**, *Escarpment Platter*, 2014, handbuilt stoneware, synthetic Hagi glaze for *Dessert Divas*  
by Christine Manfield; photo: Anson Smart

